Studies of Transition States and Societies

Activist Localities in the Queer South

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Abstract:

Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's theories about place link together various surrounding contexts: technology, media, economics, and ideology. He sees locality as a "complex phenomenological quality" (1996, p. 178) that we should not look at as context, but instead focus on how contexts define the boundaries of localities. Appadurai's theories help to link global and local by taking into account the various surrounding contexts: technology, media, economics, and ideology. This paper uses Appadurai's theory as a basis to explore how localities emerge in grassroots queer activist practices that combine offline and online tactics in their organizing. I use participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis to gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of networked locality created by LGBTQ activists physically located in Southern United States.

Keywords: activism, LGBTQ, the South, online communication.

"I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts."
— Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 178).

Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's theories about place link together various surrounding contexts: technology, media, economics, and ideology. He sees locality as a "complex phenomenological quality" (1996, p. 178) that we should not look at as context, but instead focus on how contexts define the boundaries of localities. Appadurai's theories help to link global and local by taking into account the various surrounding contexts: technology, media, economics, and ideology. This paper uses Appadurai's theory as a basis to explore how localities emerge in grassroots queer activist practices that combine offline and online tactics in their organizing. I use participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis to gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of networked locality created by LGBTQ activists physically located in Southern United States.

The primary data included here is based on the 21 interviews I conducted in 2014 with activists who were part of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) —a southern multi-issue advocacy organization that connects queer liberation with racial and economic justice, and immigration reform. Headquartered in Atlanta, GA, SONG was founded in 1993 by three black and three white lesbians (Southerners On New Ground). The organization currently covers four Southern states in addition to Georgia: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and most recently Alabama. SONG follows the Southern tradition of (re)building relationships and lives against the odds of often hostile cultural climate and geographical challenges (Burton, 2012; Drews & Law, 1997; Gregory, 2005). Their mission statement reads as follows:

> Southerners On New Ground (SONG) is a regional Queer Liberation organization made up of people of color, immigrants, undocumented people, people with disabilities, working class and rural and small town, LGBTQ people in the South (Southerners On New Ground).

SONG recognizes that queer issues cannot be limited to sexuality alone. Unlike single-issue mainstream LGBTQ organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, SONG relies on intersectionality as one of its main strengths and consciously works to bring together queer folks across the South from socioeconomically and geographically diverse backgrounds.

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Contradictory conditions of Southern activism

Queer activist networks in the South are the fruit of the peculiar conditions of the region, which is a place of many contradictions. As an imagined space, most people know exactly where the South is. Yet once you start to demarcate its exact boundaries, the conversation gets messy. If we think of the South as it is imagined in mainstream popular culture: a place of poverty and bigotry, we can point out cultural 'Souths' all across the United States and the world. Since "region is a fluid geographical concept in the American context" (Gregory, 2005, p. 7), there has been considerable debate where exactly the South as myth and physical landscape coalesce. As flyover country, the South gets imagined in our current popular media landscape as "mythically rural, white, poorly educated and thickly accented region that has yet to join the 21st century" (Cox, 2016). Reality television brings us Honey Boo Boo in Georgia and 'Swamp People' in Louisiana, which rely on the image of a Southerner as 'white trash' that never seems to cease to be a source of comedy.

This humorous image of the white Southern working class is equally hospitable and violent, as the old saying goes, "*southerners are friendly until they are mad enough to kill you*." In *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs (2014) argues, there is a "moral suspicion" attached to "the white working class as (purported) ground zero for America's most virulent social ills: racism, sexism, and homophobia" (p. 42). Hubbs traces how country music helped to establish white liberal bias against white non-urban working class that became especially prominent in the 1970s with the 'gay liberation' movement. Although initially radical, the 'gay liberation' movement of the late 1970s driven by the politics of respectability, started to distinguish themselves as middle class and moved away from working class values. This according to Hubbs resulted in:

> shifting of ideological poles in the realm of sexuality and class. Homosexual acceptance has gone from being working class and bad to the middle class and good, while homosexual aversion—what we now call homophobia—has gone from being middle class and good to working class and bad (2014, p. 150).

Yet even shows as blatantly exploitive and stereotyping as the previously mentioned *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* remind us that queer people exist among the rural working class. Sadly, however, rural queers such as Honey Boo Boo's uncle Poodle get judged against established mainstream LGBTQ aesthetics and remain culturally significant only as the stereotypical humorous trope.

Not just in popular culture, the South as the regional 'other' has been also frequently equated with the 'rural' in bicoastally biased queer theory and writing. The majority of scholarship done on LGBTQ issues locates the heart of queer culture in the city (Shilts, 1987; D'Emilio, 1989; Chauncey, 1994; Kaiser, 1997; Warner, 1999; Somerville, 2000; Valentine, 2007; Canady, 2009; Hanhardt, 2013). Among others, John D'Emilio (1989) has pointed out that queer identities emerged together with the historical development of urban capitalism, and rural to urban migration, which ultimately altered (heterosexual) family relations (p. 102). Not only has the development of queer identity paralleled processes of urbanization but, as Jack Halberstam (2005) points out, the metronormativity of queer subjectivity is embedded within a narrative of rural to urban migration that maps the psychological journey of 'coming out' onto a physical journey to the city (pp. 36-37). Within this urban (mostly New York City) queer writing tradition, the 'rural' South has been infused with tales of isolation, prejudice, and physical violence characterizing the experiences of the queers who live there.

Against popular belief, the Southern United States is home to more queer people than any other region in the country: nearly one-third of all estimated 8 million 'out' LGBTQ adults live in the 14 Southern states (Kan, 2014). At the same time, those 2.7 million LGBTQ identifying people do not benefit from the recent policy gains occurring in the rest of the country. Since only 3-4% of domestic LGBT funding goes to the South, queer activists have been forced to be creative and develop innovative organizational strategies that rely on strong intersectional relationships (Kan, 2014). This means not necessarily focusing on marriage equality, but looking at where social, cultural, physical, and mythical landscape converge to perpetuate deep-rooted structural violence.

Today's South is also one of the most racially and ethnically diverse regions within the United States. In 2010, 57 % of black Americans lived in the South, which is the highest percentage since the 1960s (Copeland, 2011). The top 5 states with the largest black alone-or-in-combination populations in 2010 were New York (3.3 million), Florida (3.2 million), Texas (3.2 million), and Georgia (3.1million). Between 2000 and 2010, the black alone-or-in-combination population grew most in Florida (29%), Georgia (28%), Texas (27%), and North Carolina (21%) (Rastogi et al., 2011). At the same time, Washington, D.C., formerly known as the 'Chocolate City' saw a 10.3% decrease in the black alone-or-in-combination population (Rastogi et al., 2011). As a result of new reverse migration in 2010, 47% of the black alone-or-in-combination population lived in the 11 former Confederate states (Burton, 2012, p. 37). The South also has the fastest-growing Latino population in the nation. Between 2010-2010, the region saw a 57 % growth in its Latino population, which was four times the growth of the total population in the region (14 %) (Burton, 2012, p. 37). New arrivals are people escaping poverty in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

In the last couple of decades, a number of queer studies scholars have been catching up with the realities of rural LGBTQ life and contributed to research that seeks to counterbalance the urban bicoastal bias within sexuality studies (Howard, 1997; 2001; Drews & Law, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Gray, 2009; Griffin, 2015). Those studies that commonly could be referred to as queer anti-urban writings are diverse in terms of methodology, the time periods, and the regions they cover. *Queer anti-urbanism* is a concept developed by Scott Herring (2010) in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* to refer to "a means to critically negotiate the relentless urbanisms that often characterize any United States based 'gay imaginary'" (p. 13). Herring focuses on rural queer aesthetics in the Midwest and in the Deep South to challenge the dominant middle-class urban aesthetics.

Queer anti-urban writing has reshaped our notions about queer lives, aesthetics, and culture and shown that what we imagine as 'rural' cannot be pinned down to a specific region. Rural queers can be found in Iowa farming community, North-western lumber camps, in frontier-era Idaho, mid-century Mississippi, and present day Alabama. Although a number of community studies have shown the uniqueness of each locality, even the academic subculture of queer anti-urbanism cannot escape certain biases: the focus in these areas has nonetheless been overwhelmingly on white gay men. Often unknowingly, this bias coaxes readers into generalizations that eliminate the more dynamic intersectional histories of non-binary folks, women, and people of color who live in the flyover country between the West Coast and the East Coast. This essay attempts to challenge this one-dimensional representation of 'rural' queer life by exploring the networked locality of a multiracial Southern activist community. I will use Appadurai's idea of locality to interrogate the boundaries between 'rural' and 'urban' and gain an understanding of how SONG functions as an activist network.

Relativity of contexts

When I started my research, I was very much invested in the 'rural' aspect of activism in the South only to discover that most of the people I interviewed if not living in the city were at least very much connected to the metropolitan areas close to them. The activists I interviewed all made a connection between '*home*' and the '*South*' and '*land*' even when raised in what is traditionally considered the North in the context of the United States. Appadurai (1996) explains that, "contexts are produced in the complex imbrication of discursive and non-discursive practices" (p. 187). The 'South' as a locality is a combination of spatial, temporal, and psychological contexts and always already relative. The difference between a 'rural' or an 'urban' queer is therefore rather ambiguous; it comes down to how the person identifies and carries themselves at particular time and in a specific spatial environment.

Mary Hooks was of the people who inhabited this complex activist locality that is not tied to a particular place, but rather defined by multiple contexts. Mary is an African American lesbian who raises a 3-year-old daughter with her partner in Atlanta, GA. I interviewed Mary Hooks before a SNaPCo (Solutions not Punishment Coalition) meeting in Atlanta in September 2014. Formed in February 2013, SNaPCo brings together dozens of social justice organizations in Atlanta (Thompson 2014). In September 2014, SNaPCo came together to oppose the Banishment Ordinance

and support pre-Booking Diversion for low-level sex and drug offences.
Mary has lived in multiple locations in the United States. She grew up in Racine, Wisconsin and graduated from Carthage College in spite of her religious aunt trying to get her expelled because of her "*lesbianism*" (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014). Moving to the suburbs of Atlanta and coming "*back*" to South meant coming back "*to the land in a lot of ways:*"

> *"I identify as a Southerner. My grandparents are from Mississippi, Tuskegee Alabama. I identify with the culture. I've lived in different places and so it has influenced how I express myself. But in terms of what South means to black folks, I certainly identify as a Southerner. Going back South is as close as you can get for black folks in terms of going back to Africa. I mean to the land in a lot of ways. The South is where black people identify as a home-base even if you were raised in the North"* (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014).

Mary's locality is defined by how she sees herself in connection to geography, region, and land, which changes as she moves physically through space in an attempt to create a stronger Southern social justice network. For her, working for SONG was a calling connected to a sense of belonging to the South and going to what she saw as her "*home-base.*"

At the time of our interview, Mary was a field organizer in Atlanta, GA, but she initially started organizing part-time for SONG in summer 2011 in Alabama. Although she only had four contacts to start with, she got in her car and drove around Alabama looking for "*gay people*" (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014). In her own words:

> *"I hopped in my car and tried all sort of ways. Went to the artsy parts of town and would smoke and people who walked pass offer light. I would go to straight places where I knew that there would be gay people there. I would out myself. I went to an open mic and said that I was a lesbian woman who was part of this organization"* (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014).

Mary's work as a filed organizer in Alabama is extreme in the sense that she had to build community from scratch, but it also highlights how SONG operates on the most grassroots level. She struggled to build an activist locality in a region where there was no prior familiar infrastructure in place. The main goal of Mary's travel was to collect contacts, create networks and bring people together for social gatherings. When she found enough people across the state, SONG organized get-togethers and movie screenings. Alabama is to date the most recent addition to SONG; other states especially Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia have more established networks.

Mary's locality is tied to her ability to read the physical, social, and cultural landscapes of Alabama. Like most people I interviewed, she did not and currently does not live in areas that are 'rural' by definition. According to the Census Bureau, urban areas (UAs) have the population of 50,000 or more and 'rural' encompasses "population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (The US Census Bureau). Yet Mary has been fostering communication and connections between folks who live all over the South in more traditionally 'rural' areas.

Mary's locality was defined by a multitude of geographical and cultural contexts that challenge the definitions of 'rural' vs. 'urban' and 'queer' vs. 'straight' places. As a field organizer, Mary moved in "*straight places*" and created opportunities for queer networks by outing herself because she "*knew that there would be gay people there*" (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014). At times she had young African American lesbians approach her and be astonished that she was a 'lesbian.' Mary's work is remarkable as she would push the boundaries of the queer activist networks in the South by putting her body in unfamiliar places; standing in the streets and smoking, optimistic for queer locality to emerge by the light of a cigarette. After a year and a half of part-time organizing, Mary left her human resources job and joined SONG as a full-time field organizer in February 2013. She said she felt a calling (Hooks, personal communication, September 13, 2014). As of October 2015, Mary is one of the two Co-Directors of SONG.

Technologies of interactivity

Moments of activism are contingent on spatial and temporal contexts—the subjects' particular somatic conditions and geographical location. However, Appadurai's idea of locality is by no means bound by what we traditionally consider physical or material (1996, p. 178). Today queer activism is immensely shaped by the relationships between what I referred to in the beginning of this essay as technologies of interactivity (Appadurai 1996, p. 178). Technologies of interactivity include all media that is utilized in the "electronic mediation of community" (Appadurai 1996, p. 195). The ambiguous yet urgent points of entry to mainstream online discourse demanded by queer subjectivities highlight the complexity of relationships between the technologies of interactivity and spatial contexts in facilitating a locality.

Similarly, to second-generation of Internet scholars such as Maria Bakardjieva (2011), I am interested in the online experience of everyday life. I am aware of the theoretical conclusions made by first generation of Internet scholars that later research has challenged (Castells, 2002; Dutton, 1999; Webster, 2002). Studies by second-generation Internet scholars have shown that online interaction is by no means free of the biases and social inequalities that are present in the offline world (Chen & Wellman, 2005; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). I am not naively optimistic in my exploration of online activist communities and communication, but I do find it important to trace the differences in activist practices that have the potential for creating a positive change toward queer liberation. I argue that activist network publics in the South use technologies of interactivity in ways that is determined by their marginalized geographical location and which can only result in a more dynamic locality when informed by the strong presence of offline context.

The need for 'safe spaces' has conditioned queer subjectivities to cultivate a unique relationship with the online world. Over the years, queer subculture has developed its own set of online communities, differing aesthetics and vernaculars. Internet scholars had already documented in the 1990s how queer folks were quickly seizing on the opportunity to come out online, express themselves more freely and form communities. Nina Wakeford (1997) in her landmark essay "Cyberqueer" states that the LGBTQ community was amongst the earliest to embrace the opportunities and activist potential of cyberspace: "Cyberqueer spaces are constantly reconstituted as points of resistance against the dominant assumption of the normality of heterosexuality in ways which are familiar to activists engaged in other struggles against heterosexism" (p. 408). Although message boards and sites such as *Datalounge* and *Autostraddle* or dating applications such as *Grindr* uniquely target gays and lesbians, queer activist locality as a non-normative alternative does not only exist in such mainstream LGBTQ identified sites.

In her work on networked publics, Internet scholar, danah boyd (2010) sees online communities as "simultaneously the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39). As she explains, "I contend that networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people" (p. 41). Boyd recognizes two major theoretical approaches to publics: the Hambermasian idea of a public space that is accessible and denotes the shared values of a large group of people and the cultural studies approach that focuses on the sameness of media around which diverse groups of people gather to form publics. Boyd sees networked media technologies as something that "extend and complicate publics in all of their forms" (p. 41) and combine these two understandings of publics. This means that publics are both virtual technological environments and imagined collectives.

Boyd also discusses how the properties of different network media transform the publics: "architecture shapes and is shaped by practice in mediated environments just as in physical spaces" (p. 55). Admittedly, online communities make a significant difference for queers in the South where there are less queer friendly establishments. SONG activists consistently shifted their technologies of interactivity in an attempt to connect the several most pressing social justice issues prevalent in their locality. They utilized architecturally diverse sets of online platforms to take the action out of online platforms such as Facebook and onto a particular geographical location. SONG activists' online presence includes posts—sharing events, selfies, live videos, and personal accounts of events—on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. These posts are tied to a particular location on the map

but ultimately add to the activist locality that is not bound by the geographical. While living in Virginia, I was contacted by SONG members via a private Facebook message to volunteer, received official emails regarding the more general organizational developments, and was invited in person to public events or protests. Queer activists use these different online platforms and face-to-face interaction to reach as many different populations as possible. The use of online platforms varies across age, race, class, and immigration status (Yates, Kirby & Lockley, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Limiting outreach to one platform and not extending beyond online communication would result in a much more homogenous activist network. SONG aims to include a diverse set of people who feel accountable towards the organization and its goals.

In more rural areas, the locality that is (in)formed by the conditions created by specific technological environments and imagined collectives, can be rather weak and strained unless there is a strong offline presence. Besides talking to people face-to-face, Mary Hooks also used social networking sites to reach out to people via LGBTQ affiliated groups in the area. For instance, she 'cold call' posted on the Facebook page of *Alabama All American Goddess* and asked for people to contact her if they were interested in community building. In a world of hashtag activism and Twitter diplomacy, we cannot underestimate the degree to which the Internet transforms contemporary society and power relations, as we know them. Yet in SONG's early stages of building networks, queer activist locality could only appear when online networked publics were connected to at least the potential of offline interaction. In other words, it appears that in the case of SONG, technologies of interactivity only contribute to an activist locality in meaningful ways if offline networks have been established in person first, especially in locations that are at the cultural and geographical margins of queer life.

Hermelinda Cortés's experience speaks directly to the limits of technologies of interactivity in more remote areas. Hermelinda Cortés, a Xicana queer feminist, is the rural and communications organizer for SONG in Harrisonburg, VA. I interviewed Hermelinda in Washington, D.C while she was on her way to New York City to visit friends. She described the limitations of queer activist locality during our interview in April 2014:

> *"The sheer isolation that people are dealing with is an incredible form of violence that I think is probably one of the most overwhelming things to combat that people are dealing with. Even our folks on staff who are very well connected to each other and networks, but we all still get isolated as queer folks of color who are mostly working class and low income. It's you know… if nothing else gets you then isolation will. So I think that is what so much of our work is around trying to break that isolation because we see it as such a huge form of violence"* (Cortés, personal communication, April 8, 2014).

Being "*very well connected*" in more isolated areas such as Harrisonburg, VA mostly refers to online communication and organizing done by activists dispersed across the South (Cortés, personal communication, April 8, 2014). Yet, even for someone who is "*very well connected*" through various technologies of interactivity, Hermelinda did not feel connected within her geographical location, until she spatially redefined her locality: she left the more isolated rural community for a trip to see her friends and fellow activists in New York City. Hermelinda embraced the relativity of geographical contexts that inform her identity as an activist and queer woman of color. Hermelinda's story shows how SONG activists negotiate the complex realities of identifying with their rural communities and land, taking pride in it, but recognizing that the lack of resources and infrastructure make it necessary to make trips to the 'city'—New York City or Washington, D.C.

Hermelinda's experience challenges the anti-urban queer writing that sometimes tends to romanticize queer life in the country in its attempt to counterbalance the urban bias in LGBTQ scholarship. The combination of two theoretical frameworks for understanding online networked publics discussed by boyd—the Hambermasian idea of a public and the cultural studies approach—speak to the ways in which online communication can provide support for activists in their work and on a personal level while at the same time highlight the shortcomings of virtual technological environments and online imagined collectives in more remote areas.

A perfect locality: Social immediacy, technologies of interactivity, and relativity of contexts

As my discussion so far shows, due to the unique socio-political and geographical conditions in the South, the queer activist locality facilitated by SONG cannot rely solely on a specific geographical context or on online technologies of interactivity to foster a reliable and functional network. In the case of SONG, queer activist locality emerges at its strongest when relativity of contexts and technologies of interactivity are combined with a heightened sense of social immediacy. Social immediacy involves the gathering of the activist community in a physical space, a movement that is usually motivated by a specific political urgency. Appadurai (1996) notes, "locality is an inherently fragile social achievement" that "must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds" (p. 179). Paradoxically, SONG's activist locality arises most unambiguously when the activists—during moments of political urgency—work to overcome the "various kinds of odds" created by the oppressive policies of the nation state.

The specific conditions of SONG's activist locality were highlighted during an informal fundraiser in the fall of 2014. I had been participating in Southern queer activist networks since I moved to Virginia in 2010, but it was not until after 2013, after the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement, that the uniquely networked qualities of this activist locality became apparent. The fundraiser took place at Salem Acuña's house in Richmond, Virginia in November of 2014. This was at the height of the Ferguson protest that erupted after police officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown (Hare, 2016). As a result, a lot of the queer activist family was on the move that fall; travelling to protests across the South to provide support. I was invited to the gathering by Salem, a field organizer for SONG at the time, whom I had interviewed earlier in the year. Salem, originally from Santiago, Chile, is a queer Latinx immigrant in his mid-twenties who has been organizing around social justice in the South and D.C. area since he was a teenager (Acuña, personal communication, March, 21, 2014).

The Facebook page for the event read (Wooden Keel, 2014):

> Lovely SONG members, supporters, lovers and friends,
>
> Join the entire SONG board and staff, along with local members, for an evening of Queer Liberation RVA style! As a political home, SONG has always been about investing in building long-lasting connection and kinship among LGBTQ folks in the South. We would like to invite you to come out and learn more about SONG's work across the region, mingle with SONG leadership and experience some fierce spoken word from our local SONG members. And as always--come looking fabulous!
>
> (We will provide heavy hors d'ouerves, wine, and beer)
>
> We will be taking donations at the door on a sliding scale:
>
> $5 entry
>
> $10-$20 entry + raffle ticket for SONG Swag Bag
>
> $25 entry + raffle for Dinner for 6 at local LGBTQ-owned restaurant L'OPPOSUM (alcohol not included)

This was an event with a total of 132 invitees. On the Facebook event page 54 people responded "*going,*" 12 said "*maybe,*" and 11 were marked as "*can't go.*" I counted approximately 60 people at the actual event.

The people present included several SONG staff members, but also supporters from all over the South. To protect the privacy of the participants I cannot mention all of their names. I only include here names of people who signed the consent form. Mary Hooks stopped by on her way to protests in Baltimore. Suzanne Pharr, a white lesbian elder in her mid-seventies and one of the founders of

SONG travelled from Tennessee. Present were also the Director of Virginia Anti-Violence Project, the Director of LGBTQ Campus Life at the University of Richmond and several volunteer facilitators for Side-By-Side, an organization for LGBTQ youth with several locations in Virginia. The diversity of people present at the event speaks to the dynamic locality of SONG activism that is defined by multitude of geographical, cultural, and professional contexts.

Besides some of the core staff, there were a number of people who were not directly involved with SONG, but part of the activist networks in the South, mostly from Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. Hieu Tran was one of these people, whom I met at Salem's house that same night. Hieu's connection to SONG demonstrates the multi-issue platform of the organization that informs its complicated locality. Hieu is an HIV-positive Vietnamese American gay man. At the time, Hieu worked as a farmer for Lynchburg Grows in Lynchburg, VA (personal communication, November 17, 2014). Founded in 2003, Lynchburg Grows is an urban farm that focuses on promoting "sustainable food production" in the community (Lynchburg Grows, 2016). Food justice activism is crucial to improving livability in the South. Lynchburg Grows aims to restructure neighbourhoods to avoid and eliminate food deserts by teaching people how to grow their own food. Although Lynchburg Grows consists of predominately white heterosexual staff members, environmental sustainability and ableism are key queer issues that demand coalition with queer people of color like Hieu. Hieu's presence at the event and involvement with SONG shows how the organization's locality gets even more multi-layered during times of political urgency, which in this case was brought about by police violence against people of color.

The potluck-style gathering culminated with recap of recent activities and multi-racial bilingual slam poetry (in Spanish and in English). The performance ended with Mary Hooks, who is a member of a queer choir in Atlanta, chanting words of empowerment while language justice activist, Roberto Tijerina translated each line into Spanish (personal communication, November 7, 2014):

In this moment,	En este momento,
We are the movement.	somos el movimiento.
Let's move while we can still do it.	Ahora vamos a movernos mientras que todavía
It's not about fighting for rights,	podemos.
It's about continuing the fight for our lives.	No se trata de luchar por nuestros derechos.
We are the civil rights movement.	Se trata de continuar la lucha para nuestras

The feeling of community and solidarity in the room after this communal chant could not be unfelt or forgotten. A diverse group of about 60 people present at the time were all connected by what Mary Hooks, during my interview with her a few months earlier, had called, "*fire in the belly*": a strong will to imagine and work toward a more just South (personal communication, September 13, 2014).

The people at Salem's house differed not just in terms of race, ethnicity, immigration status, age, gender or sexuality, but also in terms of their work and where they lived in the South. As noted earlier, there were people in leadership positions and committed members who would regularly attend protests and events, but also folks who *feel* connected by simply living across the Southern United States. Those loosely affiliated people included college professors, farmers, lawyers, high school teachers, and people working for various social justice non-profits across the region.

Such diversity speaks to the unique dynamics of the particular activist locality that SONG fosters. This locality is not only created via organizational membership, or during a protest or meeting, but by affiliated supporters who work in education or at a non-profit around intersecting themes of concern. Ultimately, SONG activists form an online/offline social justice locality that is at times formed around a particular media platform but cannot fully function without being spatially grounded. As much as scholars have argued for the positive potential of virtual networked publics, SONG as a grassroots activist network creates change by very much relying on offline moments of interaction, such as the fundraiser in Salem's house. Online environments are safe(er), but face-to-face interaction has proven to be more effective for SONG on a long-term basis.

Conclusion

The activist practices of SONG further destabilize Appadurai's already fluid notion of locality. SONG's activist locality is less of a dimension of a community or value, and more of an experience that cannot be temporally or spatially pinned down. SONG serves as an example of a queer social justice activist locality that is in movement in more than one sense of the term. Movement, not only in terms of psychological change or state of mind, but also through physical space has been one of the most prominent themes in queer writing. The psychological, professional, and physical movement of SONG activists does not match the 'progressive' homo–and metronormative narratives that dominate mainstream queer writing, scholarship, and media. These normative narratives follow a trajectory from 'rural' to 'urban' that is attached to individual 'coming out' process. SONG's online networks and strong offline presence create an alternative subcultural space across the South that challenges the boundaries between 'rural-urban', and the idea of the South as an enclosed, static place. The people I interviewed moved between the official and unofficial definitions of the South. The activists understand the South, as defined by the United States Census Bureau, as a rural queer cultural imaginary, and are cognizant where the two overlap or collide. By defying normative narratives of queerness and traditional definitions of the South, SONG activists form an experiential locality that is porous and informed by the relativity of contexts, technologies of interactivity, but perhaps above all, by the changing sense of social immediacy around a specific social justice issue.

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